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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 CAIRO 000479

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DEPARTMENT FOR NEA/ELA, DRL (CASTILLE)

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TAGS: [PREF](#) [PHUM](#) [PREL](#) [EG](#) [ER](#) [IR](#) [SU](#)
SUBJECT: EGYPT: AFRICAN MIGRANTS TO ISRAEL CONTINUE,
ERITREANS SURGE

REF: A. CAIRO 281
[1](#)B. 2007 CAIRO 3238
[1](#)C. 2007 CAIRO 2816

Classified by Minister Counselor for Economic and Political
Affairs William R. Stewart for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

[1](#)1. (C) Summary: Egypt faces a continuing problem with African migrants attempting to migrate illegally to Israel. Since the beginning of 2008, Eritreans, always a component of the equation, have been making the attempt in greater numbers. Sudanese continue to represent the bulk of migrants, encouraged by relatives and friends who have successfully made the journey and who are reportedly enjoying a better quality of life in Israel. GOE efforts to profile Africans at check-points within Egypt, the return of 48 Africans from Israel to Egypt in August 2007, and violent altercations between would-be border-crossers and Egyptian police have not discouraged at least some African migrants from making the attempt. End summary.

Number of Eritrean Border Crossers Rising

[1](#)2. (U) Although the plight of Sudanese in Egypt attempting to illegally reach Israel is well documented (ref A), since the beginning of 2008 the local press has been replete with stories of Eritreans also attempting the journey. Local press reported that on March 6 Egyptian police stopped a pregnant Eritrean woman attempting to sneak into Israel, who went into labor during questioning and was taken to the closest hospital to deliver her baby. UNHCR announced in late February that more than 1500 Africans, most of whom were Eritrean, had entered Israel illegally through Egypt in January and February 2008 (note: this seems to be a high estimate). Illegal immigration to Israel surged to 4000 people for the year 2007, or four times the normal annual average, according to Israeli press.

[1](#)3. (C) Reham Osama Kholeif of the Egyptian MFA Refugees Office told us March 5 that Egyptian security services stop between seven and thirteen Eritreans attempting to travel illegally to Israel every day. Egyptian security forces continue to profile for Sudanese, Eritreans and other Africans at check-points within Egypt, particularly at the southern border with Sudan and at El Arish in the Sinai Peninsula - the closest Egyptian city to the Israeli border - in an attempt to avoid violent encounters on the border itself (ref B). According to Kholeif, Egyptian police have, as a last resort, shoot-to-kill orders for migrants who do

not heed instructions to stop. Most recently, on March 8 Egyptian police shot and wounded a Sudanese man who was traveling with six other migrants from Eritrea, Ghana, and the Ivory Coast attempting to cross to Israel, according to local press reports. On February 16, Egyptian police shot dead one Eritrean woman attempting to cross the border, also according to local press.

Smuggling Fees Higher for Eritreans Than Sudanese

¶4. (SBU) Contacts in the Cairo Sudanese community tell us that Egyptian smugglers charge Eritreans more to make the trip to Israel than Sudanese, as Eritreans are seen as wealthier and have less experience to negotiate a good price.

Watts Roba, deputy head of the Government of South Sudan (GOSS) Liaison Office in Cairo, said that Eritreans pay USD 1800 to be smuggled across the border as opposed to the USD 800 that Sudanese pay. Alaa El Din Ibrahim, political secretary of the Abdulwahid Nour faction of the Sudanese

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Liberation Army (SLA) Darfur rebel group in Cairo, confirmed that Eritreans pay more than Sudanese, though he quoted prices of USD 800 and USD 300, respectively. Ibrahim said that Eritreans also pay more per person because they usually travel as individuals, as opposed to Sudanese who normally move with their families.

For Some Eritreans, Egypt Purely a Jumping-Off Point

¶5. (SBU) Although some Eritreans attempting to cross have been resident in Egypt for some time, it appears that many are coming to Egypt purely to transit to Israel. Kholeif

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said that, of the Eritreans arrested on the border who carry valid refugee identity cards, many were given refugee status in Sudan and then illegally crossed into Egypt in an attempt to reach Israel. She noted that the GOE refers all cases of alleged refugees to the UNHCR for determination of refugee status. Boutros Agot, a Sudanese refugee who runs a community support organization for Sudanese in Cairo, told us that the number of Eritreans in Cairo has increased relative to the number of Sudanese, but that unlike many Sudanese Eritreans are beginning to come to Egypt as a stepping stone to Israel, rather than as a place to stay permanently.

¶6. (U) The local press has recently publicized GOE court action against Eritreans illegally in Egypt, confirming that on February 26, 132 Eritreans and Ethiopians were sentenced to one year in prison and a LE 1000 (USD 180) fine for illegal residence in Egypt. Local press reported on February 21 that MFA officials denied rumors that Egypt was holding 600 Eritrean refugees in Egyptian prisons, saying that only 47 Eritreans were in detention for crimes committed in Egypt, including entering Egypt illegally.

Sudanese Still Going, Though Disagreement on Numbers

¶7. (SBU) Although Eritreans are the recent newsmakers, Sudanese and other Africans have not ceased their illegal journeys to Israel. According to Agot, crossing attempts by Sudanese jumped from "nearly zero" in the beginning of January 2008 - after a slow-down from a peak high in summer 2007 (ref C) - to "over 50 whom I personally knew" in February 2008. Roba agreed that Sudanese attempts to reach Israel had increased in the first months of 2008; many Sudanese have made it to Israel, and they encourage friends and relatives in Egypt to join them. This has caused smugglers to charge more, though still not as much as for Eritreans, as better-off Sudanese in Israel now front the smuggling costs for those trying to join them from Egypt.

18. (SBU) By contrast, the MFA's Kholeif denied that the number of Sudanese making the attempted crossing is on the increase. She said that Egyptian police interdict at most one or two Sudanese per day at the border, which she said does not represent an increase from late 2007. Sudanese are still hesitant to make the trip, she explained, due to Egypt's detention of a group of 48 mostly-Sudanese Africans returned from Israel in August 2007, who were eventually released at the end of 2007 (ref A). Kholeif admitted that the GOE takes several months to compile accurate statistics on attempted border crossings.

Comment

19. (C) Despite continuing migrant flows from Africa across Egypt to Israel, the GOE's attempts to stem said flows have been ineffective. Lacking a comprehensive strategy - potentially to include closer cooperation with UNHCR and Israel - it is difficult to see how internal Egyptian efforts will be able to deal decisively with the problem.

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